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ABSTRACT

Policymakers and educators agree that family involvement in children's education is closely linked to children's school success. An important question, however, is "does fathers' involvement matter, as well?" This issue brief looks at the link between fathers' involvement in their children's schools and kindergartners' through 12th graders' school performance, using data from the National Household Education Survey (NHES) for 1996. Findings indicated that in two-parent households, children are more likely to do well academically, to participate in extracurricular activities, and to enjoy school and are less likely to have ever repeated a grade or to have been suspended or expelled if their fathers have high as opposed to low involvement in their schools. This was also true in father-only households, allowing that children living in single-parent households are, on average, less successful in school and experience more behavior problems than children living in two-parent households. The issue brief concludes by noting that fathers can be a positive force in their children's education, and that in two-parent households, fathers' involvement has a distinct and independent influence on children's achievement over and above that of mothers' involvement. (HTH)

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ISSUE BRIEF

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Students Do Better When Their Fathers Are Involved at School

In two-parent households, children are more likely to do well academically, to participate in extracurricular activities, and to enjoy school and are less likely to have ever repeated a grade or to have been suspended or expelled if their fathers have high as opposed to low involvement in their schools.

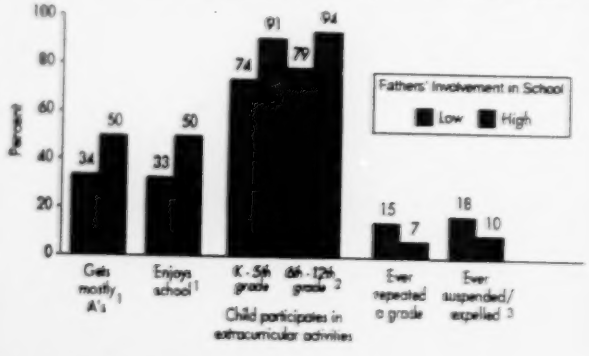
Policymakers and educators agree that family involvement in children's education is closely linked to children's school success (U.S. Department of Education, 1994; Henderson and Berla, 1994). Many policymakers, school officials, and families, however, often assume that family involvement means *mothers'* involvement in schools is important. This assumption has some basis in truth in that mothers are more likely than fathers to be highly involved in their children's schools, and the extent of their involvement is strongly related to children's school performance and adjustment (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). An important question, however, is does fathers' involvement matter, as well? In two-parent households, do fathers make a contribution over and above that made by mothers? And, in single-parent households headed by a father, does fathers' involvement in children's schools make a difference to children's performance in school?

This issue brief looks at the link between fathers' involvement in their children's schools and kindergartners through 12th graders' school performance using data from the 1996 National Household Education Survey (NHES:96), sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Information is presented for children living in two-parent and in father-only households.[1]

The NHES:96 asked about four types of school activities that parents could participate in during the school year: attending a general school meeting, attending a regularly scheduled parent-teacher conference, attending a school or class event, and serving as a volunteer at the school. Fathers are said to have low involvement in their children's schools if they have done none or only one of the four activities during the current school year. They are categorized as having moderate involvement if they have done two of the activities. Those who have participated in three or four of the activities are said to be highly involved in their children's schools.[2]

Half of students get mostly A's and enjoy school according to their parents when their fathers are highly involved in their schools compared to about one-third of students when their fathers have low levels of involvement (figure 1). Students are also half as likely to have ever repeated a grade (7 percent versus 15 percent) and are significantly less likely to have ever been suspended or expelled (10 percent versus 18 percent) if their fathers have high as opposed to low involvement in their schools.

Figure 1.—Student outcomes, by fathers' involvement in school: Students in grades K-12 in two-parent households, 1996



[1] Children in 1st through 12th grade.
[2] Youth report.
[3] Children in 6th through 12th grade.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1996 National Household Education Survey

After taking into account such factors as mothers' involvement, fathers' and mothers' education, household income, and children's race-ethnicity, children are still more likely to get A's, to participate in extracurricular activities, and to enjoy school and are less likely to have ever repeated a grade if their fathers are involved in their schools compared to if they are not (U.S. Department of Education, 1997).

[1] The analyses are restricted to children living with biological, step, or adoptive fathers. Children living with foster fathers are excluded.

[2] Not all schools offer parents the opportunity to be involved in each of these activities. Low involvement can result because parents do not take advantage of available opportunities for involvement or because schools do not offer them opportunities for involvement.

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After taking into account these other factors, mothers' involvement, but not fathers' involvement, is associated with a reduced likelihood of 6th through 12th graders having ever been suspended or expelled.

In father-only households, children are more likely to do well in school, to participate in extracurricular activities, and to enjoy school and are less likely to have ever been suspended or expelled if their fathers have high as opposed to low levels of involvement in their schools.

Children living in single-parent households are, on average, less successful in school and experience more behavior problems than children living in two-parent households (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). Most research on single-parenthood focuses on children living with single mothers. As is apparent by comparing figures 1 and 2, however, children living in father-only households also do less well in school than children living in two-parent households.

Figure 2 also reveals that children in father-only households do better in school, are more likely to participate in extracurricular activities, enjoy school more, and are less likely to have ever been suspended or expelled if their fathers are highly involved in their schools compared to if they have only low levels of involvement. Nearly one-third of students get mostly A's when their fathers are highly involved in their schools compared to 17 percent when their fathers have low levels of involvement in their schools. Even more striking, only 11 percent of 6th through 12th graders have ever been suspended or expelled when their fathers have high levels of involvement in their schools compared to 34 percent when their fathers have low levels of involvement in their schools. Although a similar pattern is observed for grade repetition, the difference between children whose fathers have high and low levels of involvement is not statistically significant.

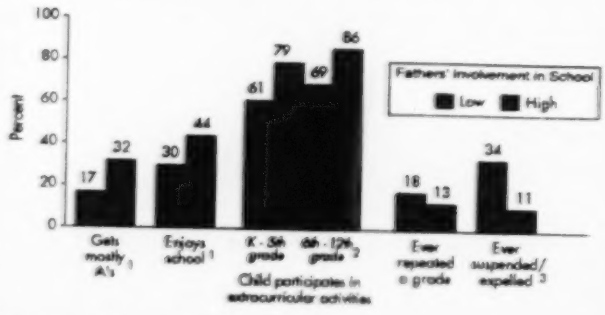
Even after controlling for such factors as fathers' education, family income, and children's race-ethnicity, children do better in school and are less likely to have ever been suspended or expelled if their fathers have high as opposed to low levels of involvement in their schools.

Discussion

The involvement of fathers in their children's schools is important for children's achievement and behavior. In two-parent households, fathers' involvement in their children's schools has a distinct and independent influence on children's achievement over and above that of mothers.

These results show that fathers can be a positive force in their children's education, and when they do get involved, their children are likely to do better in school. Unfortunately, many fathers are relatively uninvolved in their children's schools (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). These results should encourage fathers to become more involved in their children's schools and encourage schools to welcome fathers' involvement.

Figure 2.—Student outcomes, by fathers' involvement in school: Students in grades K-12 in father-only households, 1996



[1] Children in 1st through 12th grade.
[2] Youth report.
[3] Children in 6th through 12th grade.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1996 National Household Education Survey

References and Related Publications

Henderson, A.T. and Berla, N. (1994). *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family is Critical to Student Achievement*. Washington, DC: National Committee for Citizens in Education.

McLanahan, S. and Sandefur, G. (1994). *Growing Up With A Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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Issue Briefs present information on education topics of current interest. All estimates shown are based on samples and are subject to sampling variability. All differences discussed are statistically significant at the .05 level. In the design, conduct, and data processing of NCES surveys, efforts are made to minimize the effects of nonsampling errors, such as item nonresponse, measurement error, data processing error, or other systematic error. For additional details on NHES:96 data collection methods and definitions, see U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (1997). *National Household Education Survey of 1996: Data File User's Manual*, Vol. 1, NCES 97-425, by Mary A. Collins et al., Washington, DC.

This **Issue Brief** was prepared by Christine Winquist Nord of Westat. To obtain standard errors or definitions of terms for this **Issue Brief**, or to obtain additional information about the National Household Education Survey, contact Jerry West (202) 219-1574. To order additional copies of this **Issue Brief** or other NCES publications, call 1-800-424-1616. NCES publications are available on the Internet at http://NCES.ed.gov.

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